The Business of Exposure: Lewis Hine and Child Labor Reform

"*The Business of Exposure: Lewis Hine and Child Labor Reform*," by Stephen J. Fletcher. *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History*, Volume 4, Number 2 (Spring 1992), pages 12-23.

"*Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History*" is a publication of the Indiana Historical Society

"There is need of a national body which shall be a great moral force for the protection of children. It is to combat the danger in which childhood is placed by greed and rapacity. The nation has become only partly industrial and commercial. There are still states that are chiefly agricultural. Whenever any state which has been agricultural passed over into the industrial or commercial stage, it is subject to a great temptation to underbid the older industrial states, by offering cheap labor for the mills and factories. Cheap labor means child labor; consequently there results a holocaust of the children-a condition, which is intolerable.... It should be plainly said that whatever happens in the sacrifice of adult workers, the public conscience inexorably demands that the children under twelve years of age shall not be touched; that childhood should be sacred; that industrialism and commercialism shall not be allowed beyond this point to degrade humanity."

Dr. Felix Adler
April 15, 1904
(While presiding over the first meeting of the National Child Labor Committee.)

In 1904 a group of concerned reformers organized the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) in an effort to combat the growing number of children in the workplace. NCLC's arsenal included investigation and appearances before legislative bodies, publications, and the formation of local committees.

Glass factories, with their nearly inhuman working conditions for child or adult, were one of its earliest targets, and Indiana was then the third-largest glass producer in the country. Early investigations in several states revealed deplorable conditions in many other industrial and food-processing plants, and countless children were working in street trades as newsboys, messengers, and vendors.

In August 1908 the NCLC hired photographer Lewis Hine to document the conditions of working children, and his first assignment included a visit to Indiana.

Lewis Wickes Hine (1874 - 1940) was born in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. He attended the University of Chicago in 1900, where he studied education. Hine left Chicago for New York City the following year to teach at the Ethical Culture School, established by NCLC founder Felix Adler. The school's superintendent, Frank Manny, was one of Hine's professors at the State Normal School in Oshkosh. In New York, Manny gave Hine a camera and encouraged him to use it as an instructional tool and to document school activities. Hine soon taught himself photography, and during a school trip to Ellis Island he began to make his now-famous photographs of immigrants.

The NCLC did not immediately use photography to promote reform, even though its activists were aware of the camera's value in documenting social conditions. The work of Jacob Riis, especially his book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), was familiar to all reformers of the day. NCLC board member Edgar Gardner Murphy had used a camera during an investigation in Alabama and published the photographs in the pamphlet *Pictures from Life* in 1901.

Board member Robert Hunter, a Terre Haute native who was president of the New York Child Labor Committee, had employed Earnest Poole as an investigator who "day and night...lived among the newsboys, visited sweatshops to obtain for us the information we required, and got photographs of children at work."

The NCLC's December 14, 1904 treasurer's report records the purchase of a Kodak camera, and financial statements for the ensuing months indicate several expenditures for photographic supplies.

In early 1905, the NCLC received a letter from a photographer, E. M. Fairchild, soliciting "the use of his sociological camera for purposes of investigation." By the fourth meeting of the NCLC in April 1905, a policy concerning the visual documentation of child labor conditions began to emerge. To what extent Murphy, Hunter, and the Fairchild letter influenced the direction photography was to take in the NCLC's crusade is unclear, but a special policy committee provided the first revelation of an expanded role, recommending that investigators be equipped "to obtain accurate photographs wherever possible."

Two important developments between the years 1904 and 1908 led to Hine's coming to Indiana: a revealing investigation and a successful exhibition employing photographs. During its second meeting in July 1904, the NCLC executive committee targeted three areas for investigation: the coal mines and various industries of Pennsylvania, the cotton mills in Georgia, and the glass industry of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. The committee also authorized NCLC secretary Samuel McCune Lindsay (1869 - 1960) "to make special investigation in any other localities where special conditions and opportunities present themselves."

Lindsay called upon Owen R. Lovejoy (1866 - 1961) to begin the task. Lovejoy was a Methodist minister from Mount Vernon, New York, with a deep concern for human rights and an abiding interest in industrial and social conditions. He was a victim

of child labor, his arm scarred from an injury sustained while operating machinery in a Michigan factory.

In 1902, a group of Mount Vernon citizens had sent Lovejoy to observe the anthracite coal workers' strike in Pennsylvania. Because of his familiarity with the region, the NCLC asked Lovejoy to investigate the Pennsylvania mines and report on child labor conditions. In addition to his report on coal mines, Lovejoy produced "a general survey of the field," devoting attention to the enforcement of existing laws and the condition of child labor in silk mills and the glass industry.

Lovejoy's findings fueled Lindsay's October 1904 report to the executive committee. Among numerous suggestions, Lindsay advocated a larger and more general investigation into child labor conditions in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. His primary goal was to discover the extent of nighttime employment of children between fourteen and sixteen years of age in the glass industry. With his eye toward upcoming legislative sessions in each of these states except Ohio, Lindsay convinced the NCLC to hire Lovejoy as an additional assistant secretary to begin these investigations in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

In December the NCLC hired a special investigator, Mrs. Harriet M. Van Der Vaart, general secretary of the Illinois Branch of the Consumers' League, an organization with an active child labor committee, to investigate conditions in Illinois and Indiana. Illinois had enacted a relatively progressive child labor law a year earlier, and Indiana's laws were relatively lax by comparison. Van Der Vaart nonetheless found similar conditions in both states: a large number of children working at night, disregard for laws governing age limits, abuse of age affidavits by parents and employers, and lack of government inspectors to ensure compliance.

Van Der Vaart first visited Streator, Illinois, a major center of the state's glass industry situated on the Vermillion River eighty miles southwest of Chicago. The citizens of Streator "regretted the large class of foreigners who were constantly being brought in to take the place of children in the factories and it made them question the Child Labor laws," she reported to Lindsay. Van Der Vaart affirmed her impression of the influence of immigrants in East St. Louis. The president of Alton Glass Company told her, "they were sending all over the country for workmen." Noting the reduction in numbers of child laborers at the plant, she wrote: "Again cheap labor coming into the glass centers is very apparent to any observer, so something has been accomplished, even here in the glass factory which, of course, is the seat of war for the abolishment of Child Labor."

Employers could easily ignore child labor laws because of the states' inability to enforce them. The dearth of factory inspectors limited inspections to once a year at best, and the "grapevine" often forewarned company officials as inspectors made their way from one plant to another. After an unannounced return to one factory, Van Der Vaart witnessed children loitering around the building where she had previously seen none, and her driver overheard a foreman telling the boys to stay away from the entrance until his

rig had left. When she confronted the company president with her findings he responded, "But madam, what would you do if you were a proprietor and the enemy was out, would you take every precaution?"

Van Der Vaart left southwestern Illinois for Terre Haute where she visited the North Baltimore Glass Company and the Root Glass Company. These firms, unlike those in Illinois, had not attracted an immigrant work force that could satisfy their demand for unskilled labor, so employers offered "every inducement to get boys." Van Der Vaart reported that 120 boys between the ages of fourteen and sixteen worked in each plant for a dollar a day. The decrease in numbers she reported for Illinois held true in Terre Haute. Mr. Root told Van Der Vaart, "This is not due to the Law, but to changed conditions: the parents were earning more and the children did not have to work." Van Der Vaart noted: "From my observations, I should think it was somewhat due to the growing intelligence of the American people."

After talking with several mothers, she believed "the most intelligent and best Mothers do not want their boys to work in Glass Factories. Among the Americans, the Mother, who does not object, have been, so far, nearly always the shiftless weak Mother, where the home is dirty and the children neglected. I am afraid that the 'Child Labor Law' is one of the smaller factors in causing the reduced number."

Trade unions in general supported child labor reform. The president of the Terre Haute glass blowers' union favored the prohibition of night work for children under sixteen, and "thought the association would stand for it." He also believed child labor laws could be enforced, "if we get the right kind of Inspectors," stating that he had worked in the North Baltimore plant for three years without ever seeing an inspector.

Indianapolis was Van Der Vaart's next stop, where she met with state factory inspector Daniel H. McAbee. Indiana's Department of Factory Inspection, officially established in 1899, consisted of McAbee and two deputies. McAbee showed her reports for several years that indicated fewer infractions with each progressive year "as proof of enforcement of the law."

Van Der Vaart skeptically reported to Lindsay, "I do not like to take the attitude of constantly criticizing our inspectors, and of course, the enforcement of the law is one of the factors that is reducing the number, but I cannot help but be impressed with the unreliability of the figures in their reports." She cited an example of a factory that had been recorded as having only 8 children between fourteen and sixteen years of age, but when she went to the factory the manager told her that it had 150, and was shown the payroll as evidence. Furthermore, McAbee personally "did not believe very much in prosecutions," citing "about five" in the past year. To McAbee's thinking, "moral suasion" was the better approach, especially because he had only five deputies, enabling him to make only one inspection a year, a number he deemed inadequate.

Van Der Vaart and McAbee also discussed the widespread abuse of affidavits designed to keep underage employees out of the workplace. Orphans or parents who

wanted their children to work need only lie about their age. Parents, she relayed, regarded an affidavit more as a permission form than an oath. "You know the Law in Indiana allow[s] boys to work at night, and only require[s] an affidavit from the Father, or Mother to prove the child's age. The Glass Factories have their own Notaries; so the transaction is only between the employer and the parent."

Continuing on to Muncie, Van Der Vaart visited the Ball Brothers Glass Manufacturing Company, finding it "by far the most interesting factory I visited," because "it showed the progress that is coming in the glass industry through machinery, and . . . Mr. Ball . . . recognized that there were questions in connection with the industry in its relation to other people and other interests, that were to be considered aside from the commercial advantages of the firm." Ball had installed new machinery, each unit of which eliminated the need for one boy. At the time of her visit, the plant employed about fourteen hundred people, four hundred of whom were children, including a number of girls. Mr. Ball acknowledged that men could not take the place of boys in the traditional method of making glass. "They cannot take it," he stated. "They tire out."

Van Der Vaart then visited the Hemingray Glass Company, also in Muncie, where she found 150 children between fourteen and sixteen in a work force of 500 people. Mr. Hemingray, she decried, " is a man who looks at the industry entirely from the commercial side." Despite a significant number of machines similar to those at the Ball factory, Mr. Hemingray stated "they would fight in every possible way any attempt to pass a law prohibiting children under sixteen [from] working at night, "believing" it was better for them than running in the streets and did not hurt them anyway."

Van Der Vaart next visited Marion, where one citizen told her "a good number of foreigners were in town." Unlike locations in Illinois where child laborers were fewer in number compared to the immigrants, a trip to Thompson's Glass Factory revealed "many small boys" and no mechanization. In Thompson's absence, a clerk stated the firm's support for a national law that would compel all manufacturers to pay a minimum wage of two dollars a day in order to eliminate inequitable interstate competition.

Also while in Marion, Van Der Vaart made an unannounced visit to the Marion Flint Glass Company. "I went through the factory before making any inquiries and was much impressed with the number and small size of the children at work; thought the conditions worse than any factory visited," she wrote. Before closing her letter she demeaned Marion. "It is a very rough town. Saloons in every direction. I was told the saloons and gambling houses are open all day Sunday."

Despite Van Der Vaart's findings and the NCLC's desire to make effective use of the material, there is no record of the committee lobbying for legislative action during the 1905 session of the Indiana General Assembly. Instead, the NCLC focused its efforts on children working in Pennsylvania coal mines.

During the spring of 1905 Lovejoy spent three weeks in Michigan and Ohio organizing local child labor committees, which began to blossom in the states

surrounding Indiana. Ohio established its child labor committee in September. In fact, by the end of the NCLC's first fiscal year in September 1905, seventeen states and the District of Columbia had either a state or local child labor committee, or a child labor committee of their local consumers' league.

With the onset of winter, the NCLC decided to set aim at those states having legislative sessions during 1906, including Ohio and Kentucky, but not Indiana, which convened in odd-numbered years; the NCLC Finance Committee, however, reported a financial picture that was as bleak as the season.

In April 1906 the NCLC's plans included an objective to spread word of its mission through the exhibition of photographs. Records to this point do not yet mention the desire to hire a photographer, and the NCLC was not in a position to do so, but it had apparently gathered a number of photographs sufficient to consider expanding their use. The board authorized Lindsay "to prepare an exhibit of photographs, literature, etc. suitable for exhibition at any of the meetings called by the Committee, or perhaps for public exhibition in the leading cities of the country or at the next national exposition at Jamestown, in case an exhibit is made there of work in behalf of children."

The Jamestown Exposition, commemorating the settlement of Virginia, was due to open on April 26, 1907. As the magazine *Outlook* described the event, the exposition was to call the "attention of the world to the event which has had the most profound and far reaching effect of any enacted for many centuries . . . the birth of the American nation." Unlike the commercial and industrial exhibitions common for the day, Jamestown commemoration was "to emphasize the historical, educational, and social sides of the occasion."

The NCLC had Jamestown in mind the previous October when it authorized an exhibit with the Pennsylvania Child Labor Committee at the Philadelphia Industrial Exhibit. By April the board authorized "a plan for a more elaborate exhibit . . . including the distribution of considerably more literature than originally contemplated."

A significant event would shape these ambitions. On July 22, 1906 multimillionaire industrialist Russell Sage died, leaving $65 million (almost his entire fortune) to his wife, two brothers. Robert W. and Henry W. de Forest, served as her attorneys, and Robert was a founding member of the NCLC. As Mrs. Sage contemplated the investment of her fortune, she enlisted the advice of Robert de Forest. After consulting with several leading reformers and leaders of charitable organizations, Mrs. Sage endowed $10 million to establish the Russell Sage Foundation in New York with the bold mission of enabling "the improvement of social and living conditions in the United States of America." A self-published history of the foundation states that by 1907 only eight foundations had been established in the country, only two had a comparable capital fund, "and none was active in its field." What made this act even more notable was that Mr. Sage had demonstrated no interest in charity during his life.

The Russell Sage Foundation was to take up "the larger and more difficult problems" rather than undertake work already being done or likely to be effectively done by others. In the eyes of the trustees, the upcoming Jamestown Exposition provided "an exceptional opportunity for educational exhibits," and immediate action was necessary if the funds were to have any effect. The foundation made appropriations for exhibits of children's gardens and playgrounds, facts on tuberculosis, and "if satisfactory arrangements could be made, of safety appliances." This latter effort could not be accomplished, so the foundation appropriated the funds to the NCLC.

The NCLC considered its exhibit at Jamestown highly successful, and board members expressed "the desirability of keeping material on hand which can be used frequently in various conferences and social exhibits, thus at slight expense bringing the cause of child labor reform in a graphic way before the public." The Jamestown exhibit was the most important use of photography by the NCLC to that point, convincing its members of the medium's value in promoting the committee's cause. Given the NCLC's financial situation, the exhibit at Jamestown may have never materialized without the Sage grant.

Lindsay resigned as secretary in March 1907 to become the director of the School of Philanthropy and Chair of Social Legislation at Columbia University and was replaced by Lovejoy, who further refined Lindsay's visions. Lovejoy saw the need to develop state and local committees closely affiliated with the NCLC, contending that its work could best be conducted by those familiar with industrial conditions in the communities where they worked by gathering accurate firsthand knowledge of child labor conditions. For the northern states, Lovejoy recommended "careful investigation" of the textile, glass, and coal industries, and the various forms of child labor in large cities. He also recommended the adoption of district organization, including a district secretary located in Cincinnati to conduct investigations and organize local committees in West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky.

After the Jamestown Exposition, de Forest and the Russell Sage Foundation trustees concurred that they should "go slow" on additional commitments and that grants should be allocated only "where the purpose is clearly desirable and where the institution or persons . . . are so thoroughly known to the Trustees that there can be no doubt about their efficiency and effectiveness." The foundation provided funds in 1907 to finance the completion of a study of social and labor conditions in Pittsburgh that became known as the Pittsburgh Survey, the most intensive examination yet undertaken of a typical industrial city. Hine's photographs contributed greatly to the Survey' success, and in making them he sharpened his conception of the primacy of the workplace in human experience.

In January 1908 the NCLC received a second Sage grant "to push its campaign into new territory" and "to carry on investigations, educational propaganda, and organization of public opinion in the Ohio Valley states" by opening a regional office in Cincinnati. On the recommendation of Lindsay, Lovejoy sought out Edward N. Clopper (1879 - 1953) for the position of the Ohio Valley states secretary. Clopper, from

Cincinnati, was general superintendent of schools in Puerto Rico and was a teacher there from 1901 to 1904 under Lindsay, who was the commissioner of education before he left to become secretary of the NCLC.

Between April and August, Clopper visited many factories and mines to assess conditions, and he also met with reformers in several cities in an effort to form local child labor committees. On 1 June Clopper met in Indianapolis with members of the Children's Aid Association, which was founded in 1905 as the Children's Aid Society in order "to provide advice for raising children, to find temporary homes for children whose parents were unable or unwilling to support them, and to distribute milk and medical care to needy children."Clopper's intention was to create an Indiana Child Labor Committee, but the Children's Aid Association instead established a special sub- committee that tried to create a separate statewide committee.

Child labor issues were arguably outside the scope of the organization, but through its Employment Bureau, the Children's Aid Association did focus on the placement of children who were older than fourteen. During its April meeting, the CAA board recommended membership in the NCLC, and in June it appointed a "Special Child Labor Committee" to solicit people who might be interested in forming a state committee.

With new information based on Clopper's travels, the NCLC hired Hine in mid-August 1908 to photograph in Cincinnati, West Virginia, and Indiana. Accompanied by Clopper, Hine photographed street trades in Cincinnati for approximately one week. Then Hine and Clopper left for Indianapolis on or about 24 August. There, Hine photographed various factories, mills, and vendors, as well as the Pennsylvania Glass Company in Anderson. He then went to West Virginia, returning in October to Indiana where he visited factories in Marion, Peru, Muncie, South Bend, and Hammond. All told, Hine's written reports, while mentioned in some of the captions to the photographs, are no longer extant.

Hine and Clopper's visits to Indiana were timed to gather information for the Indiana General Assembly that began in mid-January 1909. Soon after their visit, the NCLC published Child Labor in Indiana, an informational pamphlet written by Clopper and illustrated with seven of Hine's photographs, to assist in educating legislators, social workers, and concerned citizens about its cause.

According to new reports, the Children's Aid Association wrote a child labor bill with assistance from the NCLC, although there is no mention of this in the organization's minutes. On 10 February 1909, the same day as the annual meeting of the CAA, first-time Democratic Marion County representative Harry W. Bassett introduced the legislation to the House of Representatives. Clopper and Lovejoy attended the meeting at the Board of Trade Assembly Hall that evening. Lovejoy spoke on child labor conditions in Indiana, and Clopper presented stereopticon views made presumably from Hine's negatives. Clopper had come to value illustrated lectures as a method "much superior to a simple address, in awakening public opinion in meetings where the audience is not fully

conversant with the needs of the child labor situation, nor aware of the extent or effects of the evil."

Bassett's bill sparked an emotional debate in the House, but it passed favorably, 66 - 9, and replaced a similar bill on the Senate. The bill had the misfortune, however, of being considered during the only split General Assembly between 1891 and 1929: a Democratically controlled House and a Republican Senate. As the legislative session drew to a close, the Senate created a steering committee to determine which of the remaining bills would be brought to the floor. Despite the inclusion of Ezra Mattingly, who presented the Senate bill, on the steering committee, Bassett's bill was ambushed and never brought to a vote.

A few days after the session, the Indianapolis Star published several of Hine's photographs in an article concerning the failure of the Bassett bill. While it is unknown whether the NCLC sent photographs of newsboys to the Star, they are conspicuously missing to today's eyes. The article attributed the bill's demise mainly to its late introduction into the General Assembly. After the failed attempt to enact legislation, Clopper reported to the NCLC, "The people of Indiana are slow to take hold of any movement, but when they do take hold they carry it through with determination. In this work it is simply a matter of keeping up the agitation until the people take hold of the movement. I have held child labor meetings in several of the principal towns of the state, but have succeeded in awakening only a passive interest. The Labor Unions are practically the only ones who have co-operated."

While the effort to reform Indiana's child labor law had failed, it succeeded in heightening Hoosiers' awareness of the plight of working children. A measure did pass the legislature that established an industrial commission to investigate factory conditions in the state. A full-fledged Indiana Child Labor Committee was established, chaired by Ulysses Grant Weatherly, head of the Sociology Department at Indiana University. The organization had its first meeting in 1909 in conjunction with the state Conference of Charities.

In 1910, the NCLC published the pamphlet, *The Needs of Indiana in Child Labor Legislation*, also written by Clopper and illustrated with Hine photographs, and renewed its effort to pass legislation. During the 1911 session Governor Thomas R. Marshall signed a child labor law less stringent than the 1909 proposal.

Authored by: Stephen J. Fletcher
Curator of Visual Collections
Indiana Historical Society